



Community Mobilization

Chapter 7. Community Mobilization

Overview

This chapter focuses on defining community mobilization and incorporating its tactics into the Weed and Seed strategy. Community mobilization is an ongoing process of building stakeholder commitment to the revitalization of the neighborhood. What it is, why is it important, how is it implemented, and examples of effective mobilization strategies will be addressed in this chapter.

Vision

Imagine, for example, that your Weed and Seed Steering Committee has been established along with your Neighborhood Restoration Subcommittee. A goal of your strategy is to increase the level of lighting on certain blocks that are known to have significant levels of drug trafficking. The limited lighting on these blocks allows drug dealers to easily complete their sales without fear of being identified and caught. A resident from the Neighborhood Restoration Subcommittee has complained about the lighting issue to the city's streets and sanitation department. She has also complained to her councilman. Her complaint is ignored; both the department and councilman acknowledge hers is only one of a few complaints they have received. Why bother with this issue when there are others to address?

This is a common example of a situation that warrants a community mobilization strategy. The solution: Bring out residents to voice their concerns and demand changes that positively affect their community. As the scenario unfolds, the Neighbor Restoration Subcommittee identifies scores of residents who also are concerned about this problem but did not know what to do

about it. A meeting at a local church was scheduled, and the councilman and management from the streets and sanitation department were invited to attend. As residents expressed their concerns about this issue and as the media prepared to air the meeting on the 6 o'clock news, the councilman quickly committed to personally working with the streets and sanitation department to address the lighting issue immediately. Within 6 weeks, new lights were installed. When the next election was held, the current councilman was able to retain his seat by an overwhelming majority.

Community mobilization is a critical tool that can be used by residents and other stakeholders to facilitate change.

The success of Weed and Seed depends in part on the ability to successfully mobilize stakeholders to support the local strategy as well as its goals and objectives. Mobilizing residents is an empowering process that often results in an increase in the number of resident leaders, a clear vision of what the community should look like, and an increase in residents' responsibility for the positive community changes.

As previously mentioned, Weed and Seed is not a program; rather, it is a comprehensive strategy that brings all stakeholders in a community together to effect change. Evidence from Weed and Seed sites and numerous initiatives of public- or private-sector organizations has shown that efforts to bring about community change cannot be done effectively without residents' involvement and leadership. Lessons learned have illustrated that this involvement is not only critical but essential to the success of revitalizing communities.

Although many people associate community mobilization with resident protests against city hall, it is actually much more. Often the issue is defined as a problem that can be solved through the collective persistence and responsibility of community stakeholders. Community mobilization brings together interested stakeholders who develop viable solutions to problems—in itself it is not the solution to problems.

The process of community mobilization can have many positive outcomes. When executed correctly, community mobilization can help build a community in ways that building new structures or refurbishing old ones never can. Healthy communities begin with the residents who live in them. Empowering these individuals to engage in the rebuilding of their neighborhoods is a critical step in promoting healthy communities. In addition to empowering residents, community mobilization processes can help create a vision for the community that serves to focus residents' energies. Again, one of the challenges of distressed communities is that they often have no vision. As a result, resources may be redirected to other communities that are mobilized and articulate their requirements for further development.

In addition to empowering residents and helping create a vision for the community, community mobilization can have another positive impact: increased capacity for sound decisionmaking by residents as well as community-based organizations. How often have several small nonprofits that provide services to the community produced extremely limited results because each organization only employs one part-time staff person? What if these organizations were focused on the benefit of the community and leveraged their collective resources to build one organization with the capacity to meet the community's need? Community mobilization can have some profound effects not only on the residents but also on the other stakeholders (public

and private) who are attempting to serve the community.



Implementation Process

When someone in your community decided that conditions might warrant the implementation of a Weed and Seed strategy, undoubtedly various meetings were held to discuss the level of readiness to pursue this designation. The meetings may have been started in the U.S. Attorney General's Office or facilitated by a community-based organization. Some person or group led the way to begin the Official Recognition process. It should have been clear to all participants in that process that residents must be integrally connected to the development of the Weed and Seed strategy.

During the preparation of the Official Recognition application, meetings were held with community residents to discuss what Weed and Seed is and what it could do for the community. This was the beginning of your community mobilization process. Community mobilization is an important element of community organizing that focuses on bringing together residents and other stakeholders to take collective and strategic action for change in the community. Community organizing generally is viewed as the broader process that is focused on a particular issue and promotes change. Community mobilization

may be one of the tactics used to help facilitate action. Both community organizing and community mobilization are ongoing, long-term processes.

The ability to mobilize residents and other stakeholders at the onset of Weed and Seed is critical; however, the work does not end when your community has been designated as a Weed and Seed site. In fact, the work is only beginning. Why? Many residents of distressed communities have become disenfranchised after many years of watching programs start and stop, with no permanent change resulting from them. They often have watched groups secure funding based on neighborhood conditions and then move out of the community. Feelings of hopelessness are common in these communities, so Weed and Seed representatives will have some major challenges to overcome before the strategy can be implemented.

Although some sites may have attempted to implement Weed and Seed without the community mobilization component, many sites can attest to the benefits of this component in moving their respective Weed and Seed strategies forward. In developing an implementation plan for community mobilization, there are several critical steps to follow. Your community may have already begun implementing some of them. You may be further along in mobilizing your community than you think.

Step 1: Secure Resident Commitment and Involvement

Community mobilization is about enlisting residents to become engaged and involved in and accountable for the planned changes that result from the Weed and Seed strategy. A good indication of resident commitment to Weed and Seed is the extent to which residents participate on the Steering Committee and subcommittees and their awareness of and interest in their neighborhood. How many residents turned out for the initial meeting to introduce Weed and

Seed? Do residents attend other functions that focus on conditions in the community? Are residents involved in discussions about the changes they are prepared to make for their community? Are residents volunteering their time to help to the extent they can? Who are these residents? Seniors? Working adults? Youth?

Before a community can begin to create a new vision, it must be recognized as a community. This should not be based on geographical boundaries established by government but rather on a perceived sense by residents that they are all in the struggle together. Remember, you may not receive an overwhelming level of support at the beginning. Many residents take a wait-and-see approach to new initiatives; Weed and Seed will not be any different. What is important is to determine if there is any level of commitment and involvement. Remember, a doctor cannot do a successful heart transplant if all the arteries to the heart are permanent blocked. Although these arteries can be unblocked, the procedure is risky. Are the arteries to your community's heart blocked by naysayers? This will be an important hurdle for you to overcome. Fortunately, you are not the only one to face this situation. Many Weed and Seed sites have had to confront major blockages by residents before successfully implementing their strategies. Do not forget to reach out to your colleagues for moral support.

How do you generate resident commitment and involvement? Begin by looking toward the leaders on your Steering Committee. In particular, resident leaders often have some level of respect in their communities and some type of community following. Ask these leaders for their help in recruiting residents to attend community meetings to

- Provide information on Weed and Seed.
- Discuss how residents can become involved in Weed and Seed.

- Explore what residents perceive are the critical problems affecting their neighborhoods (this information will be vital to the community assessment section of the Official Recognition).
- Engage residents in discussions about how problems can be solved and how they can be involved in implementing the solutions.

Positioning resident leaders to help facilitate these types of meetings will help build trust in the community relative to Weed and Seed. Therefore, if the Steering Committee has not been officially formed and you are still working with a Planning Committee, make sure that the residents, along with other stakeholders involved, represent the interests of the residents. It can be extremely challenging to have representatives on your committee who are not viewed positively by the majority of residents. Attempt to reach out to these residents.

Step 2: Encourage Residents To Help Provide Community Focus

One of the important steps that you must complete before receiving an Official Recognition designation is a community assessment. Many community development practitioners use assessment models that highlight the assets of a community rather than identify the community's problems. Why is the asset-based approach so popular? Historically, needs assessments focused primarily on the needs or problems of the community with the expectation that the resources to solve those problems would come from the outside. As a result, residents were viewed not as contributors to the growth of their community but as recipients of the various programs and services offered to solve the problems. Unfortunately, this proved to be a flawed way to examine a community. Through a neighborhood assessment, the current focus is to identify all the assets of the community, including the skills of the residents and their interest in the neighborhood. The steps involved in

conducting a community assessment were identified in chapter 4; however, it is important to stress that the focal point of the process should be to identify public issues and challenges and the available resources.

One of the advantages to the community assessment is that it serves as an important tool to help residents learn more about their community. Whether one chooses the term "community" or "neighborhood," the goal is to get residents to articulate their needs as well as contribute their skills toward changing the community. By getting residents to help decide on the changes required, the community mobilization process can help expand the base of informed resident leaders.

It is imperative that residents are involved in helping to shape the community focus of the Weed and Seed site. There are several ways you can mobilize residents for this task, including the following:

- Encourage participation in existing events such as school fairs, community festivals, and block parties by providing literature on Weed and Seed and disseminating surveys.
- Coordinate with area faith-based institutions to include information in their weekly bulletins, provide brief presentations during services, and coordinate with the outreach ministries to participate in membership events.

If residents see that the Weed and Seed focus is consistent with their own perceptions of their neighborhood, they will be more likely to participate in Weed and Seed activities.

Step 3: Build Community Networks

In every community, there are both informal and formal networks that connect residents and other stakeholders. Formal networks include neighborhood associations, resident councils, and gangs. Informal networks include families

that have lived in the same community for years and have been appointed as the neighborhood spokespersons. Other networks include ministerial alliances, social clubs, and business associations. Why are these networks important to community mobilization? They represent a significant source to target to gain support for Weed and Seed. In fact, in some communities, new efforts will die quickly if they do not go through at least one of these networks.

Taking stock of these networks will help determine what issues they may have about Weed and Seed. Participants may need to examine the composition of the Steering Committee to determine whether these networks are adequately represented. One of the advantages these networks have is that the individuals involved feel connected to the network's cause. Whether or not the networks are associated with community change is irrelevant. People support initiatives in which their friends and colleagues are involved; therefore, recognizing that these networks are an important resource is a significant step in moving forward with your community mobilization efforts.

One of the easiest ways to build on community networks is to ensure sufficient resident involvement on the Planning Committee and, ultimately, on the Steering Committee. Associations, clubs, and other groups form the basis of a strong community network. Map out these organizations and their members; you probably will find some overlap in resident participation. To the extent that there is no overlap, Weed and Seed can become the vehicle to bring these groups together and begin building additional networks. Develop a list of the community groups that exist in your



area. Identify the key leaders of each group and cross-reference them with the members of your Planning and Steering Committees. If there are individuals who are not on the Steering Committee but have skills that are critical to the overall Weed and Seed strategy, you should consider them for membership on the subcommittees.

Keep track of these networks and their members because they will be one of your most important mechanisms for informing the community about Weed and Seed.

Step 4: Create Resident-Led Leadership Structures

Resident-led entities, a subset of community networks, serve as ideal resources to help identify key leaders in the community who possess critical leadership skills. Individuals who are leading or have led organizations such as neighborhood associations or resident councils are strong candidates to help lead community mobilization efforts behind Weed and Seed. It is important to reach out to these individuals early in the community mobilization process. Typically, these leaders are concerned citizens who have the ability to bring residents together for a common cause, such as public housing, affordable housing, or public safety. If the cause is related to promoting some type of positive change in the community, these leaders must be a part of your community mobilization efforts. Remember, strong leaders bring many followers.

Step 5: Leverage Internal and External Resources

Community transformation requires that resources both internal and external to a community be identified and incorporated into a strategy for change. This is the fundamental principle behind Weed and Seed. Community mobilization is not only about mobilizing people, it is about mobilizing all types of resources, of which people are key. How do you mobilize resources? An example would be a community in which residents are unhappy because trash

service is not consistent. Because of gang-related shootings, city workers fear for their safety and do not complete their work each week. The city workers want to remove the trash, but they need residents and law enforcement to make the area safer. The Weed and Seed response would be to coordinate cooperation and collaboration between public works personnel and neighborhood residents, perhaps through a “cleanup day” event. Volunteers come into the neighborhood for a cleanup day and the city provides trucks for trash pickup during this special event. So, city resources have been mobilized to attack this problem.

Other resources outside a community can be mobilized. Youth volunteer agencies from other neighborhoods, faith-based institutions that offer clothing and other material goods, foundations that provide grants to community organizations, and government programs and services are some of the resources that can be leveraged as part of your community mobilization efforts.

Step 6: Create Additional Communication Vehicles

Community mobilization cannot succeed without strong communication. How the vision, issues, and opportunities are communicated to people influences the success of the mobilization effort. All forms of communication must consider the local languages and dialects. Not every pamphlet needs to be written in street language, but documents must be developed (newsletters, fliers) with language and at a reading level that will communicate the Weed and Seed effort to most of the community.

If the communication is verbal, the person communicating the message should be chosen carefully. You should leverage the visibility already obtained by resident leaders. If people hear or see information about Weed and Seed but do not recognize any of the people involved, your chances of getting mass participation are much more limited.

More Community Mobilization Tactics

Weed and Seed offers communities the opportunity to achieve their own vision by mobilizing the collective resources of all stakeholders. Focusing on what the community can become, confronting problems or issues, and having committed stakeholders are critical to beginning the process of revitalizing a community, but how do you bring people together over a consistent period? As part of your strategy, several programs or initiatives can be coordinated through Weed and Seed. Although these programs are important, you must also consider programs or activities that engage the residents and other stakeholders so that they can see the fruits of their labor. Community change does not happen overnight—particularly in distressed communities. This type of change is a long-term process that can lose its excitement over time.

There are several ways to mobilize residents. Again, it is important to have a clear focus, whether it is on a particular problem or a new opportunity. Once your focus has clarity, you can initiate certain activities to involve residents. Remember, residents tend to respond to specific issues or opportunities that are germane to their homes and families. Having a broad focus may not be sufficient to engage residents. Consider taking smaller steps to bring together residents and other stakeholders to address the issue or opportunity.

For example, in many communities, youth-related crimes are a major concern. The solution to this increase in crime is not to arrest more youth but to focus on why youth are participating in criminal activity. Are there enough afterschool programs to support all the neighborhood youth? What recreational activities exist in the community? Are there programs offered by community organizations that target youth?

In examining these questions, you will find that parents who are concerned about their children want to discuss this matter. Inviting parents to

attend meetings to address this issue is a first step in finding out why the problem exists, what has worked in the past, what parents believe are viable solutions to the problem, and how parents would like to get involved. Are there other stakeholders who might want to join the process? You should consider school officials who work with youth and police officers who deal with youth after they have been arrested but want to see arrest levels drop. For each specific issue, interested stakeholders want to be involved in finding a solution.

Because community mobilization is not a one-time activity, you have to think about numerous mobilization tactics that can be integrated into your local Weed and Seed strategy.

Events such as community fairs are ideal ways to get people into the community, but you want to make sure that they help drive some aspect of your strategy. Each activity or event should be linked to a short- or long-term goal. Do not organize mobilization activities that have no purpose. This is one of the quickest ways to lose credibility among residents.

Community mobilization is one of the hardest tasks associated with Weed and Seed. As a new initiative in your community, Weed and Seed has to win the confidence of residents before you secure their support. This takes time, but it can be done. In addition, you can contact other Weed and Seed sites. Weed and Seed coordinators have used creative community mobilization tactics to generate support for the local strategy.

Examples of these tactics include

- Door-to-door campaigns.
- Inhouse (community center, police storefront, etc.) coffees.
- Street fairs and festivals.



- Community rallies.
- Promotional materials that highlight Weed and Seed.
- Dissemination of fliers in public facilities.
- Dissemination of fliers at other events in or near the Weed and Seed community.
- Church-based functions such as revivals, church meetings, and concerts.

Community mobilization is an important tool for successfully implementing your local Weed and Seed strategy. As your Steering Committee develops the goals and objectives, make sure you consider how community mobilization tactics will continue to identify and generate additional resident support. Specifying separate action steps designed to build community support goes a long way toward ensuring the acceptance and integration of Weed and Seed into the neighborhood.

If you find that you are not generating enough resident support over time, ask the following questions:

- How are we communicating what Weed and Seed is about to residents?
- Did we get feedback from residents regarding the effectiveness of the message?

- Have we leveraged the relationships of key leaders in the community to help promote Weed and Seed?
- Have we asked around to find out why people are not interested in Weed and Seed?
- Are there other issues confronting the community that we are not addressing?
- Are the events we are hosting offered at convenient times for residents?
- Are we expecting too much resident participation too soon?

Although these are tough questions, the answers will provide a clearer sense of what needs to be modified to generate the level of desired support. Remember that, although you may get some level of resident involvement, residents' top priority often is to support their households. Therefore, encourage people to stay connected even if they can devote only a few hours to the Weed and Seed effort. Remember that every bit of resident involvement helps.

Implementation Issues

As you implement a community mobilization plan, participation by residents may remain low.

Remember that community mobilization requires community trust, which takes time and patience. The following are major implementation issues that can be addressed over time:

Issue: No one shows for meetings.

Possible solutions: Review the times that you schedule meetings. Are these times convenient for residents? Poll some of the residents who attended past meetings. Have people expressed concerns about the meetings and their structure or content?

Issue: One representative attempts to speak for the entire community.

Possible solutions: Seek out other leaders from faith-based institutions, schools, and local neighborhood associations. Talk with senior residents to learn more about the history of the community to help you identify residents who have longstanding credibility but may not be active at this time. These individuals can often guide you to additional community leaders.

Exhibit 7–I. Community Empowerment and Participation

Empowering residents and other stakeholders in the community is vital to the Weed and Seed effort. Community residents must be empowered to take responsibility for promoting positive changes in their neighborhood, with the reinforcement of public- and private-sector resources. By acting collectively with others, residents can mobilize financial and other resources to create change in their community and improve their quality of life.

If Weed and Seed is to be successful, residents must be involved in the effort. There must be public places in the neighborhood where Weed and Seed strategies and activities can be discussed. Additionally, neighborhood residents should be invited to serve on the various committees. Proposed plans and actions should be shared with the community in an effort to obtain their support. Faith-based and other community organizations should host forums and workshops as part of the Weed and Seed activities identified in the local strategy.

The following are suggestions for empowering neighborhoods:

- Sponsor rallies, marches, and vigils so residents, in cooperation with local police departments, can nonviolently and proactively confront and expel drug dealers from the neighborhood.
- Ensure that neighborhood residents are sufficiently represented on the Steering Committee and any other task forces.
- Ensure that grassroots organizations active in the neighborhood are well represented on committees.
- Contract with neighborhood residents and organization staff to provide research, survey, and evaluation work (at a minimum, convene focus groups for residents to voice their concerns).
- Contract with neighborhood organizations to conduct workshops to brief and involve residents before, during, and after Weed and Seed activities.
- Contract with neighborhood organizations to publish a newsletter to communicate with residents or write a column in an existing newsletter.
- Contract with neighborhood organizations for additional services (e.g., drug abuse prevention, employment training and job searches, child care, tutoring programs, youth entrepreneurship projects, and parent training workshops) whenever possible.
- Have the local government contract out public services to neighborhood groups, individuals, and businesses. These services may have to be scaled down to a size that groups can handle (e.g., lawn care, park maintenance, boarding up abandoned buildings, maintaining bus stops, alley cleanup, and tree trimming).
- Request that technical assistance organizations (e.g., National Crime Prevention Council) concentrate some of their resources in the designated neighborhoods.
- Cohost resource workshops with Federal, State, and local public and private organizations and foundations or technical assistance organizations to assist smaller groups in applying for resources to carry out seed work.
- Connect smaller groups with larger ones that can assist with editing and proposal writing.
- Help raise money for a local minigrant fund that a local organization can operate to provide assistance to groups with good seed proposals.
- Publish a resource list of neighborhood organizations that provide technical assistance and resources in this area and include some of their organizing materials.